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Ailbhe Smyth

ALL CHANGE OR SMALL CHANGE? REFLECTIONS ON WOMEN'S STUDIES

Ailbhe Smyth works in the Department of French in UCD and has been involved in the Women's Studies Forum since its foundation. She has written extensively on feminist issues in a predominantly Irish context.
ALL CHANGE OR SMALL CHANGE?
REFLECTIONS ON WOMEN'S STUDIES

Ailbhe Smyth

Introduction
At its most general, Women's Studies can be described as research, teaching and learning for, by and about women. Its central concern is an in-depth exploration of the circumstances and quality of women's lives, now and in the past, in our own and in other cultures. At the very least, women's studies involves a critique of intellectual and educational systems in which women are defined (confined) by and in relation to men. More radically, women's studies involves the discovery and development of new kinds of knowledge and new ways of knowing, which enable women to define ourselves, our experiences and our desires in (on) our own terms.

The extent and effects of male-domination of the structures and content of education have been widely and precisely described. It is clear that women are increasingly determined to break down the barriers which prevent us from participating in the knowledge-making (and using) process. We are determined to gain full access to the education system at all levels, and in all sectors. But however important the issue of equality and access, it is not the only problem. Equal access to men's definitions of the world will not in any immediately obvious way enable women to achieve the freedom and autonomy which we seek. We are determined to exercise our right to decide the sort of education, the kinds of knowledge, we want and need to realise our full intellectual, creative and social potential.

This paper is an attempt to express my own sense of the importance of Women's Studies. I make no claim to have fully worked through the issues, questions and problems raised here. Any 'answers' I may have are tentative, and emerge from my own experiences as student, teacher and occasional researcher. I hope that what I have to say will be heard as a contribution to that discussion and debate which the UCD Women's Studies Forum was set up to stimulate.
What I want to do is to consider Women's Studies in terms of

(1) its origins and development

(2) its aims and purpose

(3) some of the issues which arise from the practice of Women's Studies ("doing W.S.") in an academic context.

Origins and Development of Women's Studies

Although at times Women's Studies may seem to have developed a momentum of its own, its roots lie fair and square in the Women's Movement. Without the Women's Movement, there would be no Women's Studies.

In the late 1960s, American academic women active in the Women's Liberation Movement, inspired by the Free University and Civil Rights Movements, and the development of Black and Ethnic Studies, began to develop courses and programmes focussing on women from a variety of different perspectives. Springing from the personal and collective experience of oppression, and from a growing recognition and understanding of its mechanisms, women began to investigate the absences, misrepresentations and trivialisation of women, our experiences, contributions and achievements, within traditional academic disciplines (Boxer).

"[We] ... discovered what had long been true ......that we were absent from history books, often misrepresented by male writers, an enigma to scientists, psychologists and sociologists, and of concern to anthropologists only if we were from primitive cultures. We realized that women needed studying."

(Female Studies VI 1972)

Women's Studies rapidly became a form of political activism in its own right, seeking (to paraphrase Marx) "to understand the world and to change it." The original and continuing commitment of Women's Studies is to bring about change - change in the ways knowledge is made, transmitted, controlled and used.

"The basis of Women's Studies is a commitment to social change, specifically addressed to ending the oppression of women."

(Lowe and Lowe
Women's Studies International Forum Vol 6 No 2)
The number of Women's Studies courses and programmes offered in the USA mushroomed quickly: from the first full programme in San Diego State University in 1970, to 150 programmes in 1975, 3,000 in 1980. There is now a staggering 30,000 Women's Studies courses on offer in American Colleges and Universities. There has been a simultaneous growth in the number of Women's Studies research and resource centres throughout North America. Their general aim is to "provide institutional resources for research on women that supplement the efforts of individual scholars and make possible the development of large-scale interdisciplinary research programmes." (Boxer) Emerging more recently are "Faculty development" and "Curriculum change" Programmes which aim to inform academics about developments in Women's Studies and their implications for traditional disciplines and mainstream curricula. In 1977, the National Women's Studies Association was founded in the US with the explicitly political aim of developing and promoting "the educational strategy of a breakthrough in consciousness and knowledge" that would transform individuals, institutions, relationships and, ultimately, the whole of society.

Far from being a passing fad, a mood of the moment, Women's Studies is now recognized in North America as a powerful, vigorous and innovative growth area, especially in the human and social sciences.

Growth of Women's Studies Internationally

Elsewhere, although growth has been less spectacular, perhaps, it has been exceptionally steady and widespread. There is now, in a very real sense, an international community of Women's Studies practitioners (1). For example, in the summer of 1982, 350 women from 71 countries met in Montreal for the first International Conference on Research and Teaching Related to Women. The Conference had four main objectives:

i. to provide an international forum for discussion and exchange on teaching, research and associated issues relating to women;

ii. to reinforce newly-created research centres and women's studies groups throughout the world;

iii. To recognize and enhance the contribution of teaching and research on women to social and economic development;

iv. To facilitate the establishment of networks at all levels, national, regional and international.
One of the Conference organisers, Line Robillard Heyniger, commented that "While priorities and methods vary from country to country and from one researcher to another, the spirit motivating these pioneering investigators seems universal and fundamental" (Women's Studies International Forum Vol 8 No 2 1985). The preoccupations and problems vary between 'developed' and 'developing' countries. Change has different connotations, oppression is differently experienced in material and cultural terms, say, the United States or in South America, where two thirds of the female population is illiterate and has only limited access to basic education. The emphases of Women's Studies are not, cannot, be identical in both settings. The development of Women's Studies, as part of the wider social movement for Women's Liberation, is influenced by and responsive to the specific socio-economic and cultural situation of women in particular contexts. In fact, one of the most vital and valuable developments in Women's Studies over the past several years is the recognition that although patriarchal oppression is common to all women, our experiences are plural and diverse, shaped by our situation in time and place, by class, racial, tribal and national circumstances.

Women's Studies continues to expand throughout the world, with an increasing number of regional associations and networks (2). In Ireland, Women's Studies has developed at a phenomenal rate over the past five years. There is now a plethora of self-directed learning groups in informal settings, a fair range of courses being offered within the Adult Education Sector, and several courses and groups in third-level education. The Women's Studies Association of Ireland, established in 1984, has a membership of almost 200 individuals and affiliated groups, and organizes an annual conference, as well as publishing a quarterly bulletin.(3)

AIMS

Given the multiplicity of contexts in which Women's Studies happens, and the consequent diversity of approaches and perspectives, can we be more specific about its aims? 'What is Women's Studies?' the frequency with which the question is asked, the proliferation of responses it has evoked, seem to me to be an indication of the resistance of Women's Studies to dogmatic or unilateral definition. Women's Studies has not 'set' (fortunately). It is exploratory, experimental, diverse and open. The process of constructing new theories, new research methods, innovative pedagogy, new applications, has only begun. Women's Studies is in the chrysalis stage. My own understanding of the purpose of Women's Studies - still highly tentative - is broadly as follows:
1. to reveal the extent of patriarchal bias in the construction of knowledge, analysing how and why women's experience, and our achievements, have been denied, ignored or trivialised in the traditional disciplines.

2. to correct and compensate for that bias through research and teaching, and through the provision of new learning contexts and settings for all women.

3. to ask 'women's questions', which involves rather more than simply adding women on to existing subjects and courses. Women's Studies challenges supposedly 'universal' and 'gender-neutral' accounts of the world, which in actual fact omit or seriously distort the concerns of over half the human race. And this means developing a radical critique of knowledge and the ways in which it is used, right across and beyond the disciplines, and educational institutions.

4. Women's Studies, by initiating and supporting research, reflection, and learning, seeks to develop resources for the study of women, by and for women - redesigning curricula, offering new courses; creating new learning contexts and methods; building up library collections, information centres and networks; publishing books, journals, newsletters and so on.

Women's Studies, the Status Quo and the 'Disciplines'

There are those who reject Women's Studies on the grounds that it is 'too political', or who will accept only a diluted, sanitized version - if such is possible. But is Men's Studies (i.e. the existing body of so-called objective truth and knowledge) not also 'political', although more dishonestly, because covertly, so? I would argue that Women's Studies must retain its radical perspective and practice if it is to even begin to achieve its multiple goals. Although there may well be short-term tactical advantages to be gained from a dilution of discourse and practice, in the long-term I can see little to be gained from disguising the fact that what we are about is the reconstruction of knowledge and the redistribution of power. Women's Studies undeniably constitutes a radical challenge to the status quo and cannot not be subversive if it is to be successful. Marcia Westkott affirms that
"to participate as scholar-teachers in changing a sexist world, we do more than describe or distill that world. We simultaneously understand and oppose it."

(in Bowles and Duelli Klein)

It seems to me to be not only difficult but also seriously counter-productive to deny the oppositional place we occupy in Women's Studies.

The challenge posed by feminist scholarship to the traditional disciplines is one of considerable force. In fact, the more challenging Women's Studies becomes, the more vehemently is it resisted by entrenched academic interests which perceive it - correctly - as a threat to established modes of classification and to conventional practices in the diffusion or dissemination of knowledge. That resistance may be openly expressed or, as is now frequently the case, more covertly. Covert hostility is usually expressed through a range of tactics which include the withholding of funds and other material resources for the initiation and maintenance of programmes and courses; by ensuring that Women's Studies practitioners are denied status within the institution, by demeaning and belittling their research and teaching/learning work, mainly by questioning the validity and "legitimacy" of Women's Studies in academic terms; by denying Women's Studies practitioners recognition through research grants, publication space and other such 'gatekeeping' practices (4). It is also evident that as feminist scholarship has developed and expanded, attempts to confine and contain its impact have increased both in volume and subtlety:

"Superficiality, cooptation, bad faith are dangers to us all - which is all the more reason to be careful whom we fight, when and to whose advantage. Everywhere, under all its titles and in all its forms, Women's Studies is fragile not because it is possible in different places at different times in different forms, but because of conservative resistance.

(Peggy McIntosh and Elizabeth Minnich in Women's Studies International Forum 7:3)

The feminist critique of existing knowledge, and the discovery of new modes and methods and knowing which springs from the dual experience of oppression and the desire for liberation, clearly have profound implications for the traditional shape, scope and content of academic disciplines, and for the relationship between
disciplines. A fundamental principle is the recognition that knowledge-making is value-laden and gender-specific; that the "study of man" is literally and precisely that:

"Male experiences and the perspectives that derive from them have traditionally defined the normative in the academic curriculum; female experience, when it has appeared at all, has been treated as inferior, irrelevant, insignificant or even aberrant"

(Patricia Meyer Spacks in Langland & Gove)

Challenging the pseudo-universality and so-called objectivity of the 'male-as-norm' requires us to explore new areas and new methods of inquiry. What exactly this process involves is not, however, always clear. If the scope of the disciplines is to be expanded, if, as many would argue, the very notion of disciplinarity itself is to be exploded, to what extent does this entail the development of different analytical models, categories and tools? The question recurs regularly and somewhat problematically. Women's Studies practitioners are convinced that a feminist perspective makes a crucial difference, whatever the field of inquiry, whatever the methodology, whatever the social and educational context. The task of describing and measuring that difference is in process as the sheer volume of feminist reflection and research makes clear (5). It is certainly beyond my scope here to detail the extent to which new knowledge is filtering through and transforming - or at least modifying - 'Men's Studies'. Cheris Kramarae and Mercilee Jenkins conclude their analysis of the developments in feminist language studies with this observation:

"Feminism has made a difference in what we study, how we study it, with whom we study and who reads what we write. Even though our work may not be greeted with approval and support from many of our male colleagues, at least this work is now being done."

(in Spender)

Much of this work is being done, of necessity, on the periphery of existing disciplines. Indeed, I would argue that to attempt to assess the impact of Women's Studies on 'the disciplines' is to beg the question of disciplinarity itself. The question is really threefold:

i. Is Women's Studies beyond disciplinarity - a challenge to the concept of 'disciplined' knowledge?

ii. Is Women's Studies an emerging, self-contained 'discipline' in its own right?
iii. Is Women's Studies a perspective or approach broadly feasible or applicable within existing disciplinary parameters and therefore, once the tasks of compensation and correction have been achieved, ultimately redundant?

Of course, the question 'But is Women's Studies a discipline' is usually a dismissive, trivialising tactic: 'Is Women's Studies an academic discipline - really? Is it respectable, legitimate, serious?' To which a not illogical answer is that Women's Studies within academic institutions can hardly gain "respectability" and "legitimacy" while those who make decisions about such matters refuse to seriously consider its implications and significance.

I think we must be wary of rushing to answer, defensively, such ill-meant questions. Robyn Rowland (Women's Studies International Forum 5:5) points out that you can't, in any event, prove the "seriousness" of Women's Studies "without teaching the whole course" and goes on to suggest that it may be wise "to avoid an argument while pointing out the paucity of your [sceptical questioner's] knowledge."

Many women believe that Women's Studies cannot function within traditional institutions at all, and have chosen to pursue reflection, research, learning in other arenas, on the basis that the conflict between their feminist praxis and that of a patriarchally-controlled and ordered institution would be untenable. A number of alternative structures have been set up, throughout educational systems world-wide and also, importantly, outside these systems. However, many women, fully conscious of the tension and real or potential conflict, are "willing to try to work within the institution and try to use it for feminist ends." (Lowe and Benston in Women's Studies International Forum 7:3). Many feminists, then, clearly do work for change from within institutions, subverting traditional goals and practices, crossing boundaries and dividing lines, moving away from the narrow, highly specialised "tunnel vision" of the existing disciplines where the "Great God Method" reigns supreme (Bowles in Bowles and Duelli Klein) (6).

Sandra Coyner (in Bowles and Duelli Klein) argues that Women's Studies "should abandon [its] fierce adherence to
'interdisciplinarity' and become more like an academic discipline."
This would involve rethinking our own perception of our work and its value: thinking of ourselves as 'Women's Studies people who happen to be particularly interested in social roles, history and arts' rather than the other way round. It means accepting that "Women's Studies can be a framework with its own internal structures and approaches."

Another strand - especially predominant in North American Women's Studies - would argue that "integrating material on women into the general curriculum seems to be the most obvious thing to do" (Lowe and Bemston). On the basis that Women's Studies needs to be of, in and about the disciplines if is to change them, integration (or 'mainstreaming') does appear to be both logical, attractive and compatible with the aims of Women's Studies. In reality, it is, I think, fraught with problems which may well have a seriously negative effect on the development of feminist scholarship. Disciplines - and departments - are all too ready to lose or bury that which challenges or threatens their very existence.

In practice, many of us working in Academy will probably go on trying to make inroads into traditional disciplinary frameworks, while at the same time developing Women's Studies or generating feminist perspectives, in a freer, more autonomous space. A space where we can progress and expand without continually having to explain, defend and justify what we are about. In practice, we probably need to do both, in order to reach ever-widening numbers of women: students, colleagues, women working in our institutions, women in the community. In practice, we probably have very little option, forced as we are to adapt to the context and circumstances of the institutions we work in.

"......we will choose strategies that are most consistent with the realities of the institutions in which we find ourselves, and with our analysis of the question with which we always begin: How do women create change for women? What kinds of change can we hope for?"
(Bowles in Women's Studies International Forum 7:3)

We do, of course, need to be aware of the dangers of working within institutionalised settings and aware too of the fact that, willy nilly, Women's Studies is in the process of becoming a "specialism," with its own discourse and methodologies. My own experience is that Women's Studies, or a feminist perspective if you prefer, does not fit comfortably within conventional departments or compartments of knowledge. Knowledge, surely, is a continuum, and not a series of
discrete, hermetically sealed packages to be dispensed only with the greatest of caution. The kinds of experiences we want and need to explore as women, the problems we need to resolve, the questions we must ask, spill over, outside and beyond the often arbitrary confines of any particular "field". My sense is that, at present, the analysis of gender oppression and of power relationships between women and men in whatever area, requires a multiplicity and plurality of perspectives and approaches.

Of course, whatever we do as Women's Studies practitioners, functioning within "a not yet transformed academy" is a problematic process - and an exhausting one. We are simultaneously fighting to expand our own understanding and the perceptions of the guardians of the status quo.

Our relations with Academe are vital for the survival of Women's Studies within the university. More crucial perhaps are our relations with the women's movement outside the university, and with women in general. How can we ensure that our thinking and our research nurture change for and by women ourselves, wherever we may be? How can we ensure that our ideas are accessible and useful to women at all points on the socio-cultural spectrum? How alert are we in Women's Studies to the insights and experiences, the needs and desires of women in the wider community? How inclusive do we think Women's Studies can and ought to be? Can we make bridges - and cross them? How can we prevent (or circumvent) the destructive, polarising them/us, outsider/insider, uninitiated/expert, powerless/powerful syndrome - arrogant, patronising and a distortion of a much more complex and subtle nexus of relationships?

Do we, in point of fact, agree that it is possible to bring about change while remaining inside the university? Is there a danger of being coopted, "bought off", neutralised by an established order which perceives Women's Studies not as challenge but as threat? Do we have any alternatives to "working from within"? How can we guard against cooption of the system? Is our commitment to Women's Studies, to change, to women's liberation, strong enough to withstand an academic assault course? To what extent, and in what ways, can we prevent our ideals and our practices from being diluted by the existing, dominant academic values and practices?

We are not alone in criticizing the university. We are, however, unique in our striving for a university in which women's experience and concerns are central (not exclusive, but central nonetheless), in our efforts to relocate the bases and focus of knowledge.
Thinking, researching, teaching, learning - what is the effect of "doing Women's Studies" on our daily lives, on our relations with others, and on the lives of all those millions and millions of women with limited access, or none at all, to knowledge-making, because the burden of oppression has not yet been shifted?

Finally, we need to remind ourselves constantly that if the aim and the ideal of Women's Studies is to shift that burden, by bringing about a total change in existing power relations, the reality of Women's Studies may be one of small changes, on a day-to-day basis. 'Small changes' are not 'small change'. They are incremental and cumulative, and a vital element in women's struggle to become self-determining, independent and free.
NOTES

1. As we go to press, women in Ireland are preparing for the 3rd International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women to be held in Dublin in July 1987. Approximately 1,000 women from all over the world are expected to attend.

2. e.g. Asian Women’s Research and Action Network; the Latin American and Caribbean Association for Women’s Studies; the Association of African Women for Research and Development.

3. For a brief account of these developments see Mary Cullen ‘Redefining Knowledge: Women’s Studies in Ireland’ Council News No. 3 1986 p 1; Pauline Jackson ‘Ireland – Women’s Studies and Women’s Issues’, Address to the Conference on Women’s Involvement and Identity, Munich, 1986; Grainne Hely and Ailbhe Smyth ‘Women’s Studies – Irish Style’ forthcoming, July 1987.

4. For a detailed analysis of such practices, see Women’s Studies International Forum Vol 6 no 5 special issue: 'Gatekeeping: The denial, dismissal and distortion of women'.

5. See Bibliography for reference to a number of multidisciplinary anthologies which explore this question. Spender: Men’s Studies Modified is an excellent starting point.

6. "Methodolatry" is Mary Daly’s striking term.
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**BUNCH Charlotte and POLLACK Sandra (eds) Learning our Way: Essays in Feminist Education** New York Crossing Press 1983
"This collection of analyses, personal retellings, philosophical explorations, success stories, and documented mistakes helps feminists figure out what we need to know to learn and teach more effectively." Charlotte Bunch's contribution 'Not by Degrees: Feminist Theory and Education' is especially stimulating and useful - she discusses the functions of feminist theory, proposes a model for theory and how it might be used generally and in learning situations.

American, academic perspective - some of the essays are fairly specialized.

**BOWLES Gloria DUELL KLEIN Renate (eds): Theories of Women's Studies** London Routledge and Kegan Paul 1983 £5.95.
Very comprehensive. Presents a broad range of positions and possibilities.

**BRADSHAW Jan DAVIES Wendy DE WOLFE Patricia: Women's Studies courses in the U.K.** London Women's Research and Resources Centre 1981 £1.25
Useful but not exhaustive directory of W.S.'s courses in both Adult and Higher education. Introductions to each section raise important issues briefly and interestingly.

**BRISTOL WOMEN'S STUDIES GROUP: Half the Sky: An Introduction to Women's Studies** London Virago 1979 (Repr. 1984) £5.95
Invaluable for anyone setting up a course in Women's Studies, especially (but not only) in Adult Education. Material covers a broad range of topics (education, work, creativity, minds and bodies etc.). Good reading lists, addresses of useful groups and organisations, and helpful examples of course outlines.
Essays about Lesbian Studies courses in the USA. Includes a bibliography, and lists of audio-visual material, publishers and syllabi of some existing courses.

CULLEY Margo and PORTUGES Catherine (eds) Gendered Subjects: The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching London Routledge & Kegan Paul 1985
As its title suggests, this collection of essays deals chiefly with theoretical and practical reflections on classroom experience by American teachers of Women's Studies.

DU BOIS Ellen Carol KELLY Gail P. KENNEDY Elizabeth L. KORSMEYER Carolyn W. ROBINSON Lilian S. Feminist Scholarship: Kindling in the Groves of Academe Urbana University of Illinois Press 1985
A collective book (as distinct from a collection) in which the authors seek to understand how feminist scholarship both challenges and is shaped by traditional disciplinary inquiry.

How to start women's studies in an Adult Education Context (formal or informal). This is a resource pack, very clearly presented, with comprehensive information, and suggestions for courses, discussion, exercises and materials for handouts. Extremely practical.

Although now out of date, gives some idea of the richness and variety of work by, about and for women.

HULL Gloria SCOTT Patricia SMITH Barbara: All the women are white, All the Blacks are men, but some of us are Brave New York The Feminist Press 1982 8.95 US dollars
Interdisciplinary collection of essays on both the problems and practice of Black Women's Studies. American perspective.

The impact of women's studies/Feminist scholarship on the academic disciplines.
Developing feminist education for young women: this book is addressed to both adult women educators, and teenage women studying or working.


A wonderful collection of course materials, with a concise introduction to each section. Extracts from the work of modern Feminists - and also Genesis, Rousseau, Freud, de Beauvoir, Mary Wollstonecraft, and many others. The introductory section provides one of the clearest answers I have come across to that very difficult question "What is Women's Studies"?

SPENDER Dale (ed) "Men's Studies modified, the Impact of Feminism on the Academic Disciplines" Oxford Pergamon Press 1981 £6.00
Stimulating and thorough - includes essays on language, literature, economics, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, biology, science, etc.

A well-presented pack of seven booklets covering the following areas: Society, Politics, Work, Education, Minds and Bodies, Creativity, Child bearing and Child rearing. Each booklet contains an introduction, a diagram representation of the subject, course outlines, a reading list and some hand-out material.

Deals with research in Social Science only, but raises important issues of interest to feminist researchers in all disciplines and areas. Very clearly written - lively and witty.

Compelling, and convincing, demonstration of the ways in which the educational system generally, and adult education more particularly, systematically oppress women. The chapter on "Work in progress" describes the highly innovative 'second chance for Women' course in Southampton. Thompson argues that "the only real opportunity of equality for us is to develop our own education tradition alongside men's education, to create the conditions in which as women we can make our own knowledge, become our own teachers and be in control of our own resources". A very important book.

Collection of 26 articles dealing with central topics and themes. Part of an integrated O.U. course, it provides useful and thought-provoking, although sometimes rather difficult, reading and discussion material.

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**WEA Women's Studies Newsletter**
Regular Newsletter of the Workers' Educational Association W.S. groups. Very well produced, containing articles, reviews, news; this is a lively and interesting magazine.
Subscriptions: WEA, 9 Upper Berkeley Street, London W1H 8BY

**Women's Studies Bulletin**
Quarterly bulletin of the Women's Studies Association of Ireland. An agreeable format (improving all the time!) with stimulating contributions - articles, views, reviews, news - from women in a wide range of teaching/learning contexts. Every issue a "special issue"!

**UCD Women's Studies Forum**
A series of working papers on a variety of issues including: Women and the Law in Ireland; the History and Politics of Abortion; Feminine Spirituality; Women Writing; Farm Women in Ireland; Gender and Class in Second-Level Education; Women's Studies; Irish Folklore and Oral Poetry. Available from: Ailbhe Smyth, UCD Women's Studies Forum, c/o Department of French, University College Dublin, Dublin 4
"Feminism in all its varieties has always insisted on the importance of women’s ideas, feelings and experiences. It has valued women in our own right and not according to male-defined ideas about worth. Over the years, feminists have come to celebrate women’s strengths, abilities and intelligence and stressed the need for us to rediscover our past and to re-evaluate our present conditions. This process of re-education for women is called ‘Women’s Studies’, and it represents one of many different responses by women to the challenge of feminism."

Liz Steiner-Scott (ed.)
Personally Speaking
Dublin Attic Press 1985

"A course, a programme, a pedagogical method, a way of looking at the world, a new discipline, a movement for change, a critique of male mythology, a feminist for cultural revolution .... the experience of women thinking, talking, working and being together."

Feminist Studies VI 1972, New York

"There is nothing novel or radical about the study of women in itself. What is new about women’s studies is its commitment to women’s liberation and its roots in the women’s liberation movement. Women’s studies is generally informed by a sense that women are an oppressed social group and that as a result of this oppression they have been omitted from academic study, or represented only from the point of view of the male, white ruling elite."


"It is important that we should examine critically the reasons why, and the means by which, knowledge in our society is produced, assessed and distributed. Women’s studies has a most important part to play in ensuring that knowledge, itself a form of social power, is not produced solely in the interests of the powerful and the influential."

Mary Evans in Bowles and Duelli Klein, 1983
"Out of the initial 'fad' stage, women's studies is now compelled to prove that what we are about is serious academic work. We are in a position that is almost impossible. On the one hand, our continued presence in the University shows that we still believe in the value of that social institution. On the other hand, as feminists trying to create that new thing, 'Women's Studies', we are opposed to the university as it presently exists. We are critics of the very institution of which we are a part. Like Brecht, we doubt".

Gloria Bowles
in Bowles and Duelli Klein (eds.)
Theories of Women's Studies, 1983

"...the study of women in the curriculum and in research institutes is not only an academic question, it is not only a question of the right of women to a place in the curriculum that will allow them images of achievement and aspiration comparable to those the curriculum has generally afforded at least to white middle class males. It is also essential if the University is to continue to be able to state its claim to truth; and because of the increasingly significant way in which knowledge is used in our shrinking world, it is also of ultimate importance to the present and future lives of women all over the world".

Florence Howe in Change, 1982

"Women's studies provides an avenue for women to be both the subject and the object of study in traditional scholarship. Just as individual women are developing their individuality, free from cultural stereotypes, and women collectively are developing some sense of common experience and purpose, free from culturally isolating processes, Women's Studies is also facing its own issues concerning identity. Such an identity is similar to but also quite distinct from other academic areas. Since Women's Studies is more than just new subject matter and is often distinguished by its new forms of internal and external organisation, it will likely continue to develop its own distinction.

Kathleen O'Connor, Blumhagen & Walter D. Johnson (eds.): Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Collection
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...was founded in 1983 by women staff and students with the primary objective of stimulating and developing women-centred research, teaching and learning. The Forum provides women throughout the College and in the wider community with the opportunity and space needed to explore ideas and opinions, to pursue research interests, and to develop resources for both teaching and scholarship.

The Women's Studies Forum seeks to reach across and beyond the traditional dividing lines - between disciplines, between students and teachers, between staff in different sectors in the university. Very importantly, the Forum seeks to reach out and join with women in the wider community, whose insights, experiences and diverse practice are crucial to its growth.

The Forum organises fortnightly Research Seminars, regular lunchtime talks and discussions, an annual series of literary readings, and also holds three or four one-day seminars on specific themes during the course of the year.

Women's Studies Forum events are normally open to both women and men, students and all staff, and to the general public.

For further information about events and the work of the Forum please contact:

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